Comments on Panel Presentations
Darcy Ashman (07/16/01)
OAS/IAF Forum on Building Democracy from the Grassroots

I.   Summary of the presentations.
   A. <u>Keynotes from hosting agencies & speaker</u>.
      1. IAF: local development takes place when poor and marginalized groups in communities are at the center of their own development.
      2. OAS: focus on genuine grassroots democracy.
      3. Lester Salamon: 'classic' presentation on the third sector/civil society paradigm. By implication, civil society is a key link between local development and genuine grassroots democracy.
   B. <u>A series of panels, from macro to micro perspectives</u>: e.g. (1) policy and local government, (2) findings and 'best practices' from IAF studies, and (3) an award-winning case of local collaboration & partnership from El Salvador. Challenging to summarize due to diversity but will try to suggest some common themes.

II.   Q: How does decentralization lead to local development?
   A. <u>A central hypothesis from international research & practice</u> (UNDP, IDS, etc.): decentralization is more likely to be successful in fostering grassroots democracy and local development when two conditions are met: (1) central government transfers significant power & resources to the local level, & (2) poor and marginalized groups increase their participation in local decision making & resource allocation.

   B. Evidence from the presentations regarding transferring power from the center?
      1. <u>Policy/legislation</u>. Three kinds of policies: devolution (decentralization of legislative & administrative decision-making, accompanied by resources); deconcentration (decentralization of administrative authority); & delegation (transfer of authority to institutions external to civil service to implement services). Bolivia case of devolution; El Salvador case of all three. Without legislation, no systematic framework. Will only have isolated cases.
      2. <u>Authority.</u> Strong authority, e.g. ministerial level, to lead the process. Leadership facilitates, rather than dominates. Extends outreach to allies.
      3. <u>Political will.</u> Authorities put 'teeth' into policies by making commitments & setting concrete goals for transferring power and resources.
      4. <u>Extend technical resources and educational opportunities.</u> Facilitate access to the necessary technical knowledge, hardware, and training opportunities for local governments. Promote equity among small and large cities.
      5. <u>Related questions to discuss & debate</u>:
         a. How do macro economic policies of the central government affect opportunities for development at the local level, e.g. debt repayment, globalization, economic models influencing planning, budgeting, etc.?
         b. What is the role of political parties? Do they need to be re-vitalized to take up and articulate pro-poor ideologies and strategies? Or, are they basically instruments of the status quo that should be by-passed in favor of new forms of organization for political organization and advocacy?

   C. Evidence regarding empowerment of poor & marginalized at local level?
      1. <u>Within local government</u>:
         a. Associations of local government officials can foster dialogue, mutual learning, advocacy for supportive policies & 'best practices'. Best practice models are not to be copied but as examples from which to learn. Exemplars cited: local governments that took their increased autonomy from the central

level as opportunities for collaboration at the local level; dynamism of interaction.
   b. Need for human resource development, e.g. education, training, & learning from experience.

2. <u>Within poor and marginalized groups at the community level</u>:
   a. When poor and marginalized groups in communities are the main actors, decision-makers, problem-solvers in their own development (IAF studies).
   b. When grassroots groups strengthen their own organizations to represent them and engage with other actors at the local level, e.g. NGOs, local government, private businesses, etc. (IAF studies, El Salvador presentation).

3. Three common elements of the decentralization/democratization/local development processes:
   a. <u>Time.</u> The processes may be slower than many would like, but time is necessary for genuine development and social transformation, e.g. for collaborative consultation, decision-making, experimentation, systematization, learning, etc. Bolivia has 7 years of experience, yet continues to work towards improvement. For donors, the common use of 1 – 3 year project formats is not realistic to see the kinds of results desired.
   b. <u>Learning.</u> Takes place at multiple levels, e.g. individuals, families, organizations, networks and societies. May be fostered through educational programs and through experience, e.g. like 'jazz' or 'learning by doing'.
   c. <u>Capacities.</u> Core competencies for effective functioning of collaborative partnerships & alliances at local levels & between national & local levels include: trust-building; engaging in dialogue, negotiation, & deliberation; being responsive & flexible; innovating; & leadership by facilitation & inspiration rather than by domination.

III.   Q: Implications for Policy?
1. These experiences and studies can complement other academic & policy studies. 'Exemplars' are very helpful for identifying models and hypotheses to test, if not replicate in other settings.
2. <u>For central governments</u>:
   a. Enact strong policies, e.g. devolution, and follow up with effective strategies, implementation plans, goals, and commitments. Even well designed policies are not enough to produce changes in governance. Proactive & strategic implementation & assessment is also necessary.
   b. Enact/enforce related policies, e.g. framework of democratic rights, enabling environment for civil society organizations, pro-poor budgets, etc.
3. <u>For donor governments</u>:
   a. Current policies to support partnerships and civil society strengthening are basically sound, but in many cases the policy tools & instruments for grant making and contracting are counter-productive. Ideas of results-oriented management & accountability may not be problems, but current methods & practices undermine the processes necessary for effective partnerships (IAF studies). Need for more responsive, flexible, & innovative methods to support effective partnerships and manage risks of development projects. Longer time frames. Allocate resources for learning & 'capacity-building'.

4. <u>For grassroots development leaders</u>:
   a. Scope to be 'optimistic skeptics' (or 'skeptical optimists'). Have been combating poverty and disenfranchisement for decades. Big picture can look bleak, e.g. 'societies in crisis'. Yet the studies and presentations provide evidence that there are possibilities to find opportunities to collaborate with agencies from government, civil society, and business to promote & produce concrete benefits for communities. May not need to give up ideologies or identities, but be willing to find common objectives & negotiate plans & strategies. History, including conflict & struggles for democratization, has made these kinds of opportunities possible.